

**Missouri Assessment Program**  
**Spring 2006**

**Communication Arts**

**Released Items**

**Grade 8**

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## Directions

This passage tells the history of the chuck wagon. Read the passage. Then answer Numbers 1 through 6.

# The Cowboy's Home on Wheels

by LeeAnn Blankenship

Texas rancher Charles Goodnight had a problem. He needed skilled cowboys to drive his herd of two thousand longhorn cattle to New Mexico to be sold. He couldn't offer high wages. He couldn't promise easy jobs or even nice weather. But he decided that decent, warm meals might entice men to work for him.

In the mid- to late 1800s, cattle drives sometimes took three to four months, and once the drive began, there were no stores for hundreds of miles. All the food and supplies needed for the trip were carried on two-wheeled carts. Usually, the cowboy's food was boring and unappetizing.

Goodnight went to work and solved the problem. His invention of a mobile kitchen, the *chuck wagon*, got its name from the cowboy word for food, "chuck."

Goodnight took a surplus Army wagon and rebuilt it with Osage orange, a wood so tough that Indians used it to make bows. The wagon's iron axles were stronger than the

wooden ones found on standard wagons, and the wider wheels lasted longer.

At the back of the wagon, Goodnight designed a big cabinet, called a *chuck box*, with a number of compartments and drawers. Cups, plates, eating utensils, flour, sugar, spices, dried fruit, pinto beans, and a keg for sourdough for biscuits could be stored separately there. One special drawer, called the *possible drawer*, held everything from first-aid supplies to needles and thread.

A hinged lid at the bottom of the chuck box folded down onto a swinging leg. This made a good worktable for the cook. The wagon also had a water barrel with spigot; a toolbox; a coffee grinder; and a smaller box, the *boot*, for heavy pots and pans. Stretched underneath was a large piece of rawhide, the *possum belly*, for carrying fuel for fires.

The wagon also had a canvas top and room not only for bulky food

Go On ►



**The “cookie” was usually paid twice as much as an average cowhand.**

items but also for extra clothing and bedrolls.

The first chuck wagon was an instant success. Eighteen cowhands joined Goodnight and his partner, Oliver Loving, to drive the cattle to New Mexico for a handsome profit. The route they took—later called the Goodnight-Loving Trail—became one of the most heavily used cattle trails in the Southwest.

The chuck wagon soon was the backbone of all successful cattle drives. Other ranchers created their moving kitchens, and eventually the Studebaker Company produced

chuck wagons that sold for \$75 to \$100 apiece, about \$1,000 today.

The chuck wagon was much more than a mobile kitchen. Sometimes called “the trail drive’s mother ship,” it was like a magnet that drew the men together.

The wagon and the ground around it were the cowboy’s home. There he enjoyed hot meals, a warm fire, and good companionship. He could also get a bandage, a haircut, or horse liniment for his sore muscles. And there, under the stars and around the chuck wagon, he crawled into his bedroll each night.

Though cowboys took their orders from the trail boss, the cook was king of the chuck wagon. Usually a retired cowhand, the cook was the hardest-working member of the trail team. He was the first up in the morning and the last in bed at night. Besides making meals, the cook packed and drove the chuck wagon, doctored sick or injured cowboys, pulled teeth, trimmed hair, repaired clothing, and settled bets and arguments.

Cooks were often grouchy and seemed to enjoy their reputations for being ill-tempered. It was said, “Crossin’ a cook is as risky as braidin’ a mule’s tail” and “Only a fool argues with a skunk, a mule, or a cook.”

A good cook was essential to the drive’s success. One cowboy recalled, “A camp cook could do more toward making life pleasant . . . than any other man in the outfit.”

A good cook tried to offer a varied menu, even though he was limited to items that could be stored for weeks at a time. Cowboys ate plenty of beans, rice, sourdough biscuits, salt pork, and strong coffee. Dessert was a spoon of molasses, an occasional pie, stewed tomatoes sweetened with sugar, or dried fruit such as apples, peaches, or prunes.

The need for long drives lessened by the 1890s, when railroads started running through cattle country. By then, Charles Goodnight’s chuck wagon had found its place in history and in the hearts of thousands.

### Cowboy Chatter

**Brown gargle**—weak coffee  
**Calf slobbers**—meringue  
**Cookie or Coosie**—a cook  
**Lick**—molasses  
**Prairie coal**—dried cow or buffalo chips used for fuel  
**Prairie strawberries**—beans  
**Sinkers**—heavy biscuits  
**Skunk eggs**—onions  
**Swamp seed**—rice  
**Texas butter**—gravy

*Go On ►*

**1** Which of these sentences or phrases from the passage contains a metaphor?

- ☐ “sometimes called ‘the trail drive’s mother ship’”
- ☐ “Only a fool argues with a skunk, a mule, or a cook.”
- ☐ “Usually, the cowboy’s food was boring and unappetizing.”
- ☐ “‘camp cook could do more toward making life pleasant . . .’”

**2** Cowboys were probably willing to put up with an ill-tempered cook because the cook

- ☐ worked the longest hours
- ☐ was the trail boss’s business partner
- ☐ improved their life on the cattle drive
- ☐ had the power to hire and fire cowboys

**3** What problem did Goodnight have? How did his invention of the chuck wagon help solve it? Use information from the passage in your answer.

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- 4** Read this caption that appears under the drawing.

**“The ‘cookie’ was usually paid twice as much as an average cowhand.”**

According to the passage, why would a cook on a cattle drive be paid twice as much as a cowhand? Explain your answer using two details and/or examples from the passage for support.

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- 5** Which of these two sources do you think would be best for additional information about the first chuck wagon? Circle one source, then give a thorough explanation of your choice using information from the passage.

**Circle one:**                      **a biography of Charles Goodnight**

**website about an annual Chuck Wagon Cook-Off**

Explanation: \_\_\_\_\_

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*Go On ►*

Imagine you are a reporter in Texas in the 1800s. Write a brief newspaper article about Goodnight's first cattle drive with the chuck wagon. Include three details from "The Cowboy's Home on Wheels" in your newspaper article.

**STOP** 